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Book review: Understanding Journalism

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BURNS, Lynette Sheridan (2002)
Understanding Journalism, Sage Publications
 ISBN 0 7619 7026 6 (pbk) 177 pp.

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Sheridan Burns does a fairly accurate job of condensing an entire profession into roughly 175 pages, employing at the end of each chapter useful "real life" examples. Readers will gain from Burns' vast sourcing of material from Australia, America and the UK. The book focuses on the practice of everyday journalists.

Like most journalism guides, *Understanding Journalism* is the latest to summarise a host of other media players into one comprehensive guide. The result, a straightforward, broad, encompassing summary of tools for the aspiring journalist. UJ balances academic purists entrenched in theory with a practical guide for day to day journalists. This balanced approach is achieved by extensive direct quotations from media tacticians with on-the-job nuts and bolts training.

The chosen format to Burns' latest book is a synopsis for the neophyte journalist. Crisp, clear and well-edited it could easily be chosen for virtually any introductory level course in journalism. The first two chapters read like an extended introduction and could be reduced to one. In chapter three, *Journalism as Decision Making*, Burns brings together the purpose of the book by choosing one of her own quotes. 'Learning by doing may be common in journalism education, but doing alone does not guarantee learning.'

The second part of the book, 'Journalism in Action' explores the functions performed by journalists -- identifying, evaluating, writing and editing news. Burns sequences the daily rigors of journalism --from the morning planning meeting through to the editing of the final drafts. Burns is comprehensive and brief with her explanations while remaining insightful, "In other words, a journalist never knows what the interviewee thinks, only what the interviewee says." Statements like these are interspersed throughout and make for logical and matter of fact approach. The book never loses sight that news is presented to audiences through a process that reflects social and cultural context. More further, Burns informs readers, 'What facts must be included in the story?' Figures are used as flowcharts, which can become daily reference

points when writing for clarity and evaluating a story for meaning.

Most paragraphs begin with journalism vernacular and seem to bog down but Burns supplies examples to put good use to the information flow supported by ample citations from Chomsky, Schon and Mencher. She offers practical knowledge of a newsroom in action. This combination complements absorption and retention. Maintaining focus, the book relates how a journalist uses critical reflection by weighing important decisions for the final output: a well-balanced story.

Modern journalists are encouraged to be well-versed in law and ethics, sprinkled throughout the book. Students and entry-level practitioners will find this guide a good place to start and expand their knowledge of the field.

The body of the book reveals the process used by journalists to identify and evaluate potential news stories. News is presented to audiences through a process that reflects the social and cultural context in which it is produced. Burns goes further by identifying important points of a journalist's control of decisions about information that is essential and how news sources must be interrogated. The actual news written or in spoken form is explored in chapter eight with the conclusion of the book dedicated to editing.

Reading the book, one can recognise a fine student of journalism. She has been a journalist for over 25 years first in Sydney Burns was integral in establishing the journalism program at the University of Newcastle, Australia in 1992.

Burns however, does not abandon the journalistic code for fear of offending readers and sticks closely to the script laid by her predecessors. Independent or original views are often ignored when a consensus can be granted. The icons of the daily newspaper; Jimmy Breslin in a dusky bar hammering for information, a metro reporter doggedly piecing together links to corruption are ignored. As newspapers are guided by marketing formulas that aim for safe ground, so do books that aspire to teach future journalists.

Understanding Journalism is light on offering advice on sentence and paragraph construction even though one chapter is dedicated to editing news. Conversely, it promotes internal questions that should constantly assail a journalist--so they make better decisions. These thought provoking decisions should ultimately make better journalists.

Most journalism books are self-serving tombs written by journalists who often cannot handle the streets or have had enough. Books on journalism are rarely taken seriously, unless the author has some currency. Academic institutions increasingly refer to hand-outs on issues related to classroom discussion. We are

inundated with new publications each year re-writing the same formula. Modern texts become skeleton versions of the best quotes and most up-to-date references. Yet *Understanding Journalism* could easily be chosen by university instructors for its brevity, ease of language and overall utility.

In the end, UJ is a skillfully edited modern update that is useful for beginners to test their strengths in journalism. Useful Journalism books promote the act of reporting over texts and Burns does not shy away from this fact. UJ follows the well established guidelines for ethical and sound journalism. What separates this book from others, is that Burns encourages through well-written words and insightful examples to take to the streets and still read her book. UJ held my attention while providing a framework in which to build a career and is highly recommended. ■

HERBERT, John (2000)

Journalism in the Digital Age: Theory and Practice for Broadcast, Print and Online Media, Focal Press, Boston. ISBN 0240515897. 349 pp.

ALYSEN, Barbara; SEDORKIN, Gail & OAKHAM, Mandy (2003)
Reporting in a Multimedia World, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
ISBN 2003 1865089109 Pbk. 312pp

Reviewed by Padma Iyer

The Australian, New South Wales

Journalism, like many vocational courses, is prone to the chicken-or-the-egg conundrum: does practice precede theory or does theory pre-exist for changes in practice? Historically, perhaps it could be argued that the bird that laid the egg out of which the chicken ultimately emerged wasn't a species of fowl as we now know it at all, thus making it convenient for us to view journalistic theory as an evolutionary process which has dramatically transformed the original impulse. Without going too far back in time, and without sacrificing the relevance of a sharp focus on contemporary media, it could be observed that the mutually accommodating adaptability of theory and practice continues its relentless pace, leaving neither the practitioner nor the teacher any wiser as to who is the primary agent of change.

It is quite likely the influence that creates the circumstances for change is the greatest when it is exerted by a practitioner-